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# This Boy's Dreadful Tragedy: Emmett Till as the Inspiration for the Civil Rights Movement

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## THIS BOY'S DREADFUL TRAGEDY: EMMETT TILL AS THE INSPIRATION FOR THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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By Jackson House

*"Twas down in Mississippi not so long ago  
When a young boy from Chicago town stepped through a Southern  
door  
This boy's dreadful tragedy I can still remember well  
The color of his skin was black and his name was Emmett Till"  
The Death of Emmett Till - Bob Dylan*

When Emmett Till's body was pulled from the Tallahatchie River, it was beyond recognition. The Sheriff of Tallahatchie County, H.C. Strider testified that "the skin had slipped...it had slipped on the entire body. The fingernails were gone from the left hand...and [on] the entire body, the skin was slipping or it had completely gone off it." He went on to say, "the tongue was extending...about two and a half or three inches. And the left eyeball was almost out, enough to almost fall out... [The odor of the body] was so bad that we couldn't examine the body until the undertaker got there."<sup>1</sup> This description captures the gruesome nature of Emmett Till's murder which led to great publicity of both his funeral and the trial of the killers. The tragic story of Till's murder shocked and haunted the nation. The acquittal of the murderers lit a fire of indignation under the black community, and because of his age and innocence, was effectively used a rallying point for the struggle of Civil Rights.

Emmett Till's story began in Chicago, where he was born to children of the so-called "Great Migration" out of the South. When he was fourteen-years-old, Emmett, or 'Bo' as he was called by his family, was allowed to travel south during his summer vacation to visit his cousins in Money, Mississippi. He arrived at 7:25pm on August 21, 1955 in Winona, Mississippi, where he was picked up at the depot by his cousin by Maurice

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<sup>1</sup> Sheriff H.C. Strider Testimony. Emmett Till Trial Transcript, Sept. 1955, p. 285-286.

Wright, the eldest son of Mose Wright. They travelled the 30 miles to the Wright residence, which was a sharecropper's house outside of Money.<sup>2</sup>

Emmett Till lived his last seven days in the Mississippi delta as the guest of a sharecropper on a plantation where the fields were white with cotton when he arrived. His first few days were spent in the fields, where he and his cousins worked hard during the day and played hard at night. However, it was the events of Wednesday August 24th that changed Till's life. On that day, he and his cousins drove into town to Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market to buy candy. What exactly transpired in the store that evening has been a subject of controversy, and the conflicting accounts persisted well past the trial of the murderers.

On the front porch of Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market there was a group of local kids playing checkers when Till and his group arrived. Till was accompanied a group of six cousins and friends, ages 12 to 19.<sup>3</sup> While some kids were on the porch, others were coming in and out of the store purchasing bubblegum or candy. Some accounts assert that Till was acting on a dare when he went into the store. William Bradford Huie wrote that, "He (Till) showed the boys a picture of a white girl in his wallet; and to their jeers of disbelief, he boasted of his success with her. 'You talkin' mighty big, Bo,' one youth said. 'There's a pretty little white woman in the store...let's see you go in and get a date with her?'"<sup>4</sup> Wheeler Parker, Till's cousin, agreed in a 1955 interview that "One of the other boys told Emmett there was a pretty lady in the store and that he should go in and see her."<sup>5</sup>

Another cousin, Curtis Jones, said in a 1985 interview published in the *Clarion Ledger* that "the boys had dared him. He was trying to show them that he wasn't afraid. He wasn't the type that scared easily."<sup>6</sup> Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley also said that he had a picture of a white woman

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<sup>2</sup> Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson. *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2003), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Devery S. Anderson "A Wallet, A White Woman, and A Whistle: Fact and Fiction in Emmett Till's Encounter in Money, Mississippi" *Southern Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2008), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Huie, William Bradford. "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." *Look Magazine*. (January 24, 1956: 46-50), 46.

<sup>5</sup> *Chicago Tribune*. Chicago, Illinois. (August 30, 1955)

<sup>6</sup> *Clarion Ledger*. Jackson, Mississippi. (August 25, 1985)

in his wallet, but that it was a picture of the actress Hedy Lamarr, and it had come with the wallet.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of the conflicting accounts about what prompted Emmett Till to enter the store on that day, he did, and it was the encounter in the store and the events that followed that ultimately sealed his place in history. However, the reports about what happened while Till was in the store also conflicted, the woman who was on the receiving end of his advances, Carolyn Bryant testified during the trial, and many of those who were present that evening also published their account of the events in the years that followed.

Wheeler Parker said in a September 1, 1955 interview that, "I never went into the store. But when I heard there was trouble, I sent one of the other boys in to get Emmett."<sup>8</sup> Devery Anderson relayed Carolyn Bryant's version of Till's actions toward her according to her testimony in court.

She claims that when she held out her hand for Till to pay for his purchase, he grabbed it firmly and asked, "How about a date, baby? She jerked her hand free, turned to go to the back of the store, and Till caught her by the cash register, placing his hands on her waist. "What's the matter, baby? Can't you take it? You needn't be afraid of me." Till bragged that he had been "with white women before." Then, said Bryant "this other nigger came in the store and got him by the arm...then he told him to come on and let's go."<sup>9</sup>

The simplest version of the events was that Till went into the store alone to buy some bubble gum. At some point, he did something that scared or angered Carolyn Bryant enough that she went out to get a gun from under the seat of her car.<sup>10</sup> Most sources agree that at this point Emmett Till either said "goodbye" or gave the infamous 'wolf whistle.' His mother stated that she taught him to whistle to alleviate a stutter that he had as a child. She contended that he only whistled because he was trying to say "bubblegum" to

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<sup>7</sup> Till-Mobley and Benson, 102.

<sup>8</sup> *Chicago American*. Chicago, Illinois (1 September 1, 1955)

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Simeon Wright. *Simeon's Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till*. (Chicago, Illinois: Lawrence Hill Books: 2002), 51.

one of his friends.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the extent of the encounter between Bryant and Till, the group then left the store immediately and returned to Mose Wright's house outside of Money and things returned to normal for a few days.

The ultimate consequence of the events was that Emmett Till was kidnapped, beaten, shot, and thrown into the Tallahatchie river, where his body was held underwater for three days by a 90 pound gin fan that was bound to his throat by barbed wire.<sup>12</sup> Philip Kolin wrote that, "historically, we may never know exactly what Emmett Louis Till said or did inside Bryant's grocery store in Money, Mississippi on Wednesday, 24 August 1955, but we can chart the tremendous impact his death has had on the collective memory of civil rights activism."<sup>13</sup> The impact was seen immediately in the wide media coverage the case received, not least of which his murderers' nationally published confession in 1956.

### **Two Sides to Every Story**

Besides the murder itself, the most important piece of the Emmett Till story was that the two half-brothers, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, were acquitted of their crimes. In their nationally published confession, they justified their actions by claiming that Till made repeated advances towards Bryant's wife Carolyn. However, Till's fatal mistake was not in the act itself; it was the fact that he was black and she was white, and the killers frankly acknowledged this.

This confession, published only five months after the murder took place, was in *Look* magazine and was entitled "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." A reporter named William Bradford Huie went to Milam and Bryant's defense attorneys and requested to interview the defendants. He reasoned that since they could not be tried again for murder and a grand jury had declined to indict them for kidnapping that they would be willing to confess what actually transpired.

The men's story, which was primarily told by Milam, laid the blame at the feet of Emmett Till, claiming that he had squeezed the hand of Carolyn Bryant and proceeded to grab her by the waist and say to her, "You needn't be afraid o' me, baby. I been with white girls before." Huie, in his

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<sup>11</sup> Mobley-Till and Benson, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Philip C. Kolin "The Legacy of Emmett Till." *Southern Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2008), 6.

commentary of the men's recollections, said, "Roy Bryant knew in his environment, in the opinion of most white people around him to have done nothing would have marked him for a coward and a fool."<sup>14</sup> Milam stated further that the two men intended only to threaten and whip Till, but eventually his obstinacy put their anger over the edge. Milam said that Till was not afraid of them and even said "I'm as good as you are. I've 'had' white women." Apparently this was the breaking point, Milam confessed to Huie that, "when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him."<sup>15</sup>

Almost immediately after Huie's infamous article was released, it was contested by both blacks and whites. Southern newspapers complained that it was slanderous to say that the killing was approved by the State of Mississippi, while Northern newspapers challenged some details of his article. Most significantly, the *Chicago Defender* published the statements of Mamie Bradley Till, Emmett's mother, who said that Emmett "would never brag about women he had...They [Bryant and Milam] just wanted to kill him because he was a Negro, and Negroes to them are just like dogs to be shot down."<sup>16</sup>

Simeon Wright released a book in 2010 entitled *Simeon's Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till* in which he claimed

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<sup>14</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown wrote that "insistence upon valor was especially evident in moments of crisis, when outside forces threatened Southern integrity" (Bertram Wyatt-Brown, 43.) The outside force threatening Southern integrity at this time was the force of national press, and the thing being threatened was not so much integrity, but a way of life. Reader's Digest published a retrospective on October 3, 1955, that stated of Sumner, the town where the murderers were tried and acquitted, "never became part of the New South - never wanted to. Its roots remained deep in the delta. The people liked it that way...Segregation wasn't an issue; it was a way of life." (Reader's Digest October 3, 1955) Wyatt-Brown went on to say that "Southern whites were just as ready to take matters into their own hands when revenge for familial loss was required in their relations with each other. A crime of passion in response to a family wrong was often greeted with acquittal. If the law intervened at all, the penalty was often slight." (Wyatt-Brown. 43.) The position of women in Southern society was especially significant to this situation. The man, who was the head of the household, had the duty to defend his family's honor, which began with his wife. Wilbur J. Cash wrote in his work *Mind of the South*, that the "concept of honor, of something inviolable and precious in the ego, to be protected against stain at every cost and imposing definite standards of conduct" (75). Wyatt-Brown continues, "nothing could arouse such fury in traditional societies as an insult hurled against a woman of a man's household...fierce retaliation was therefore mandatory when a daughter, wife, or mother had been dishonored" (53).

<sup>15</sup> Huie, William Bradford. "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." *Look Magazine*.

(January 24, 1956: 46-50), 46., 46-50.

<sup>16</sup> "Son No Braggart, Says Mrs. Bradley," *Chicago Defender*, 21 January 1956, 1.

that Emmett did nothing wrong while he was in the store. It is important to note the contrast in Wright's account and the account published by Huie in 1956. In Huie's account the killers conveyed the events in a way that made Emmett Till look like a flagrant violator of Southern customs. On the other hand, Wright recounted the events in a way that emphasized Emmett Till's innocence and ignorance of Southern customs. He asserts that Till did nothing while he was in the store, and only after they had exited the store did he whistle at Mrs. Bryant. But that he only did this to get a rise out of the other teenagers. Only as they were all running away "did it slowly dawn on him that he had done something wrong."<sup>17</sup>

Besides the murder itself, the most important piece of the Emmett Till story was that the two half-brothers, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, were acquitted of murder, a crime that they freely confessed when protected from double jeopardy. Their justification for their actions was that Till made repeated advances towards Bryant's wife Carolyn. At the very least Emmett did whistle at her, and at the very most he grabbed her forcibly by the waist. However, Till's fatal mistake was not in the act itself; it was the fact that he was black and she was white, and the killers frankly acknowledged this.

Therefore, the Emmett Till case has a great deal of importance because of its centrality to the American story of Civil Rights. It was the first time since the Civil War that national attention was so intensely focused on the hypocrisy of Southern racism. The murder came on the heels of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and would be swiftly followed by the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Little Rock Central High School Crisis.

The story of Emmett Till is not a question of innocence or guilt, nor is it a question of right or wrong. Those things have been clearly established in the immense body of scholarship on the case. It is clear that Emmett Till was innocent and his killers were guilty, even if the State of Mississippi's justice system did not confirm this. People have questioned how two men who had children and families of their own, somehow felt justified in murdering a boy based on allegations that he had made inappropriate remarks to a white woman. Such a negative display of human behavior perpetrated by these men can only be examined in its context, specifically that of the Southern United States in the 1950s, and more specifically the racial climate of Mississippi. Therefore, before the

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<sup>17</sup> Wright, 51.

Till case can be discussed further, the racial and social climate that brought about the murder of Emmett Till must be examined more closely.

The reasons that Emmett Till was murdered were not new in 1955; in fact, they had long been part of the Southern Mind.<sup>18</sup> Miscegenation was seen as the greatest evil by many Southerners and according to Milam's, Bryant's, and a large part of the South's deeply held values, the murder was justified. That is, these men were fulfilling what they saw as a duty to society, something they believed was both ethically and morally imperative in order for society to continue to function as they thought that it should.<sup>19</sup> The corrupted logical justification for the murder aside, the public arena in which the trial and acquittal took place made people question the ease by which such a murder could be 'justified' in the Southern mind. Whether this was an isolated event in a backwater, part of Mississippi or not, soon the whole South was thrown into this struggle.

### **Lynching Theory and the Case of Emmett Till**

Lynching was used more often on those who were accused of sexual crimes than any other crime. A famous example of this was the lynching of Fred Alexander in Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1901 when he was accused of the rape and murder of a young white woman. Christopher Lovett argues, "that this gruesome lynching mobilized the black community and led African Americans to use all available means to end the vigilante justice that intimidated the state's black citizenry."<sup>20</sup> The Emmett Till murder was similar in many ways to this lynching. Till was accused of sexually motivated crimes, and the black community responded to the unjust 'justice' dealt by the white community.

Despite these similarities, there have always been two sides in the debate on whether Emmett Till's murder was technically a lynching: from the very beginning the NAACP asserted that it was a lynching, while the Governor of Mississippi contended that it was not. The details of the case were characteristic of many lynchings, and the definition of lynching enumerated in 1940 stated that "there must be legal evidence that a person

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<sup>18</sup> Wilbur J. Cash. *The Mind of the South* (1941; repr., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1946) Cash argues that the Old South did not die with the death of the Confederacy, some aspects of it carried on long after. It is these aspects that are so important to the story of 20th century of race relations.

<sup>19</sup> Huie, 46-50.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher C. Lovett "A Public Burning: Race, Sex, and Lynching of Fred Alexander" *Kansas History* 33, no. 2: 94-115. World History Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed August 29, 2013).



had been killed, and that he met his death illegally at the hands of a group acting under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition.”<sup>21</sup> The Till case exhibited many of these classical characteristics of lynching, but the discussion over the technicalities of the case can easily distract historians from the more difficult questions that must be addressed. Even if the murder was not technically a lynching, talking about it as such makes discussion and comparison to other lynchings much easier. Furthermore, the black community’s insistence that it was a lynching was a central element to their use of the case as a rallying point for Civil Rights action.

In one of the most significant works on lynching, *Festival of Violence*, Tolnay and Beck assert that the two primary ways to study lynchings have been “either the case study method or the comparative method.”<sup>22</sup> Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages: the case study method allows for in-depth analysis of a single event, but often the broad scope of the institution as a whole is overlooked.<sup>23</sup>

The institution of lynching could nearly be pursued into the infinite regress of history, but most historians denote the ‘Lynching Era’ as 1880-1930, which is roughly the end of Reconstruction to the beginning of the Great Depression. The Till case falls fifteen years after the end of the ‘Lynching Era’ but because it bears many of the characteristics of a classic lynching it is often studied as such. Historians have proposed several models to explain lynching, which include but are not limited to: Social Threat, Popular Justice, and Competition. Aspects of the Till case are apparent in all three categories, but it does not fall neatly into one.

The underlying assumption of Social Threat theory is that the “majority group enjoys greater access to power and resources and takes whatever steps necessary to perpetuate its advantage over the minority.” Furthermore, “When the perceived threat from the minority group increases, the intensity of the majority group’s repression of the minority will also

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<sup>21</sup> Fitzhugh W. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 17. Brundage cites the quote from: “Definition of Lynching,” Jan. 17, 1931-Nov. 6, 1941, file 9, reel 2, ASWPL Papers, AUL; and Linda O. McMurray, *Recoding of Black Experience: A Biography of Monroe Nathan Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 124-127.

<sup>22</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), ix.

<sup>23</sup> *Festival of Violence and Lynching in the New South* examine the trends of lynching through a specific period of time, which the authors do for 1882-1930 and 1880-1930 respectively. The authors of these works use the comparative method very effectively.

increase.”<sup>24</sup> Hubert Blalock asserted that the three categories upon which minority groups can infringe are “economic, political, and status.”<sup>25</sup> Emmett Till, as a fourteen-year-old boy, was never accused of being an economic or political threat to Carolyn Bryant, or anyone else for that matter. It was only the social threat that black men posed to white men that made his alleged actions towards Carolyn Bryant wrong. An insult is only insulting if it is from a threatening party; if Bryant and Milam did not feel as least subconsciously threatened by Emmett Till, then they could have dismissed his childish actions.

The Popular Justice model is based on the commonality of nearly all the lynching reports that claimed that it was the result of an alleged crime. Tolnay and Beck argued that “the bulk of lynchings were sparked by behavior that violated uncoded caste rules of conduct, and therefore were unlikely to be adequately punished by the formal justice system.”<sup>26</sup> The reasons that were given by J.W. Milam in *Look* magazine for the murder of Emmett Till were, in fact, behaviors that ‘violated uncoded caste rules of conduct.’ Therefore, the Emmett Till murder could have easily fallen into this category of lynching if the murder itself had been perpetrated by a larger number of people. Although the murder was essentially condoned by the community, it was done *ex post facto*. Therefore, although there was the façade of justice built by the murderers in their statements in *Look* magazine, the Till case does not fit the traditional Popular Justice model.

The competition model is related closely to the social threat model. Tolnay and Beck even follow Blalock’s three criteria of areas of competition: economic, political, and status. The authors cite a Census Bureau statistic on the drastic increase in the number of white tenant farmers and slight increase in black tenant farmers to argue that, “sizable numbers of southern white farmers found themselves in the same direct economic position as blacks.”<sup>27</sup> Southerners then had to compensate for their economic kinship to blacks by asserting themselves through physical violence. Due to reconstruction policies that culminated in the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, blacks enjoyed enfranchisement and thus more political power until Southern whites were able to wrestle back control

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<sup>24</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, 57.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 57. Blalock, 1967.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

through punitive voting laws following the end of Reconstruction in 1877. However, in areas “where the black vote could not be purchased or neutralized through fraud, whites sometimes resorted to violent intimidation.”<sup>28</sup> The importance of status, largely defined in racial terms, as an impetus for violence became more important when blacks and whites lived in similar economic circumstances. There were less tangible ways to measure the differences between blacks and whites, therefore, “without a clear economic claim to superiority, the caste division became even more important as a source of status differentiation.”<sup>29</sup> The boundary of sex was, in many ways, a last line of defense for white supremacy. The death of Emmett Till was a prime example of this; these two men were, in their minds, protecting the sanctity of Carolyn Bryant by punishing her insulter.

### **Popular Response from 1955**

In 1955, Mississippi was not a traditional society in the traditional sense of the word, but there was some remaining sentiment. One of the *United Press* reporters covering the case wrote that “It was a simple case that an all-white-male jury wasn’t going to convict two of their neighbors for killing a black.”<sup>30</sup> This implied that because these men acted on behalf of their family, the men on the jury would have done the same thing. The white men who had been selected for this jury on this trial consisted of “ten farmers, an insurance salesman and a laborer.”<sup>31</sup> The defense attorney, Joseph Wilson Kellum, famously told the jury that their forefathers would ‘turn over in their graves’ if they convicted Bryant and Milam. Although it had been nearly one-hundred years since ‘their forefathers’ had fought and died for the Confederacy, an appeal to this portion of Southern consciousness was apparently effective.

Indeed, there were white people who thought the actions of Bryant and Milam were justified. In a letter to prosecuting attorney Gerald Chatham, J.S. Connelly said that “Mrs. Bryant’s husband and his kinsmen are her natural protectors from insult and injury.”<sup>32</sup> These men deserve honor,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>30</sup> Tom Brennan. “Emmett Till: More than a Murder: World watched drama unfold in rural county courtroom” *The Clarion Ledger*: Jackson Daily News August 25, 1985., 6

<sup>31</sup> John R. Tisdale. “Different Assignments, Different Perspectives: How Reporters Reconstruct the Emmett Till Civil Rights Murder Trial.” *The Oral History Review* (Winter 2002; 29, 1.), page 48.

<sup>32</sup>Historians who have dealt with lynching narratives also dealt with the foundational social perspective from which these narratives were written. Susan Jean wrote that, “Any effort

not blame for doing their duty.” He went on to say that if these men were proven guilty, the harshest punishment they could possibly deserve would be a “verdict of Justifiable Homicide.”<sup>33</sup> Another letter to Gerald Chatham, from an anonymous “Southerner in Chicago,” said that, “It’s good to know that the Southerners still try to protect their women. The niggers up here have nothing else but rape and crime in their minds. They’ve raped little girls from 2, 7, 17, and women to 65.”<sup>34</sup> These are but two examples of the distorted views held by white Southerners when it came to race and sex. Even H.C. Strider, the sheriff of Tallahatchie County said that, “We never have any trouble until some of our southern niggers go up North and the NAACP talks to them and they come back here.”<sup>35</sup>

Jean Lutes astutely observed that the difficulty with the historicity of lynching coverage was that “lynching stories were emotionally laden and politically complex, structured by an ongoing, often explicit, struggle between detachment and intimacy, and they were always more than simply source material.”<sup>36</sup> Whether it was racist white southerners reporting the events or progressive black reporters, due to the extreme emotional power of lynching, each group had a strong message they wanted to convey. Perhaps the white newspaper wanted to vilify the black man who was lynched or the black newspaper wanted to vilify those who had done the lynching. Lutes went on to say that, “They reproduced the violence by writing about it, investing it with even more significance and power...” Lutes was writing about the white reporters who covered lynchings but black reporters did the same thing to the opposite effect. They portrayed the violence so that a broader audience could experience it and know the true ugliness of racism. Likewise, the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy

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to tackle the assumptions embedded in...white accounts of lynching should make no claims...to exonerate all lynching victims of having committed a crime...such an attempt would [be] showing as little concern for the truth as the original depictions.” Some observers and reporters of the Till case thought that Emmett Till was out-of-line for whistling at Mrs. Bryant. However, Emmett Till did nothing that warranted his death, when his actions are viewed from any other context other than the American South.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from September 11, 1955 from J.S. Connelly (Morehouse Gin Company, Morehouse Missouri) to Mr. Ger ald Chatham, Hernando, MS.

<sup>34</sup> Postcard postmarked September 8, 1955, Chicago, Illinois to Dist. Attorney Gerald Chatham, Hernando, Mississippi.

<sup>35</sup> The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till directed by Keith Beauchamp (2005)

<sup>36</sup> Lutes, Jean M. “Lynching Coverage and the American Reporter-Novelist” *American Literary History* 19, no. 2: 456-481. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 29, 2013).

evoked strong emotions in individuals regardless of race. The coverage by both black and white newspapers showed the inherent emotional power of the Emmett Till case.

### **Newspaper and Periodical Coverage**

The Emmett Till case was widely covered from the moment that the story emerged from Money, Mississippi. Local, regional, and national newspapers all sent reporters to the area and followed the story because it was headline news for both blacks and whites. *The New York Times* was one of the first national newspapers to cover the story, doing so even before the jury reached a verdict. In a September 2, 1955, article entitled "Mississippi To Sift Negro Boy's Slaying" it was asserted that Till only "allegedly had whistled at a white woman." They even quoted the Governor of Mississippi, Hugh White, who at the time expressed his faith in the courts to do justice, while maintaining that it was not a lynching, but a "straight-out murder."<sup>37</sup>

This article was followed up by another, twenty-two days later, as a response to the verdict in the trial. It was simply titled, "Mississippi Jury Acquits 2 Accused in Youth's Killing." The author asserted "the race relations aspect...was injected strongly into the summations of the jury." He goes on to argue that the sympathy felt towards the defendants was the result of the national scrutiny brought onto Mississippi by the case.<sup>38</sup>

The *Chicago Defender*, on the other hand, reported the case as a lynching and called upon the Eisenhower administration for the passage of an anti-lynching law lest the "blood of Bo Till...be on its hands." Furthermore, the *Chicago Defender* said that Governor Hugh White was "splitting hairs" by calling it a murder and not a lynching, saying that the fact that he was being punished for something and the deed was done by more than one person made it a lynching.<sup>39</sup>

The *Baltimore Afro-American* initially reported the murder as an "act of mob violence" language that conjured up images of lynch mobs in the minds of the readership of the newspaper, even though the Till murder was only perpetrated by two men. However, they also called the crime a

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<sup>37</sup> *New York Times* Sep 2 1955 "Mississippi To Sift Negro Boy's Slaying."

<sup>38</sup> *New York Times* Sep 24 1955 "Mississippi Jury Acquits 2 Accused in Youth's Killing"

<sup>39</sup> *Chicago Defender* 9/10/55 "Nation Shocked, Vow Action in Lynching of Chicago Youth."

lynching and compared it to two other lynchings that had taken place in the same year.<sup>40</sup>

The coverage in all three of these newspapers illustrates the broad coverage of the Till case. The national attention of the black community was focused on Mississippi, and the attention of white Northerners was focused on the South. The group that did not want attention was white Southerners. They were the only ones who had anything to lose. The black community had everything to gain, and they used the murder of the Emmett Till as an example of the worst manifestation of Southern racism.

The case was also covered in local newspapers and the killing was treated as brutal and senseless by all. The *Greenwood Commonwealth* reported that, "The citizens of this area are determined that the guilty parties shall be punished to the full extent of the law." Likewise, the *Vicksburg Post* and the *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times* both condemned the killing, saying "The ghastly and wholly unprovoked murder...cannot be condoned, nor should there be anything less than swift and determined prosecution of those guilt of the heinous crime," who went on to say, "We have met no Mississippian who was other than revolted by the senseless brutality. The people who are guilty of this savage crime should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law." Even the *Clarksdale Press Register*, which Hugh Whitaker pointed out was "published about twenty miles from Sumner," reported that, "Those who kidnapped and murdered Till have dealt the reputation of the South and Mississippi a savage blow. It is a blow from which we can recover only by accepting this violent and insane challenge to our laws and by prosecuting vigorously the individuals responsible for the crime."<sup>41</sup>

In October, the month after the trial, almost every major newspaper or magazine had something to say about the events. Before the murder of Emmett Till, lynchings had been common but they were often shrouded in mystery and the perpetrators were never brought to trial. The fact that the killers were brought to trial and exonerated gave the Till case an unprecedented level of notoriety. Life magazine published an article entitled

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<sup>40</sup> African American Newspapers portrayed the racial element of this case very clearly from the beginning and were often critical of the Governor White denotation of the event as a "straight-out murder."

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Stephen Whitaker, "A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Emmett Till Case." The editorials cited were reprinted in the September 4, 1955 edition of the Memphis Commercial-Appeal.

"Emmett Till's Day in Court" in which the author asserted that "the prosecution was against the whole mass of Mississippi prejudice...the undertones of racial hatred in the case came out when the defense suggested that the whole thing was a plot by outsiders to help destroy 'the southern way of life.'" Reader's Digest also decried the situation in Mississippi saying, "the town (Sumner) never became part of the New South--never wanted to. Its root remained deep in the delta...Segregation wasn't an issue; it was a way of life."<sup>42</sup> In an October 1955 editorial entitled "Mississippi Barbarism," Crisis asserted that "the white people of Mississippi are directly responsible for this hideous crime...the white minds of Mississippi are poisoned with every imaginable lie and slander about Negroes and the NAACP."

In September, the month after the murder and of the trial, the coverage was focused on the events themselves. However, each group had an angle by which they were covering the events. National newspapers were critical of the situation in the South. In October, after the killers had been acquitted, the criticism of Mississippi and of the South was even stronger. During this time, there also were accounts that claimed to give the true story of what happened on the night of the kidnapping and murder because there was much speculation about what took place.

### **Impact on African-American Society**

In his article "A Wallet, A White Woman, and A Whistle," Devery S. Anderson makes the point that those who argue that Emmett Till did not "engage in a harmless, childish act, such as talking fresh to a girl, whistling, or even asking for a date, play into the idea that the southern caste system was legitimate." Till only suffered the fate that he did because he was black; not denying his questionable actions strengthens the fact that he "challenged an abhorrent caste system in a very real way."<sup>43</sup> Anderson's argument that Till's actions, whatever they may have been, should not be ignored because they make him a "tragic character"

Harvey Young, in his article "A New Fear Known to Me: Emmett Till's Influence and the Black Panther Party," writes about the extended coverage that the Till case received nationally in black newspapers. He argues that it was an important factor in the development of organizations such as the Black Panthers, which "anchored itself not only in the witnessing of racial violence, such as Emmett Till's murder, by black youth but also the

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<sup>42</sup> *Reader's Digest* "Mississippi: The Place, The Acquittal" 10/3/55

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, 19.

concerted efforts of members of Till's generation to prevent the recurrence of such tragedies."<sup>44</sup> Instead of being retrospectively focused and examining what led to the murder of Emmett Till, Young looks from the Till case forward and recognizes the impact that it had on black society.

The Emmett Till case's impact on the Civil Rights movement fits in with a 1984 study by Lewis M. Killian, which argues, "while organization and rational planning are key variables, social movement theory must take into account spontaneity and emergence and the forces which generate them."<sup>45</sup> Killian's work is focused on the Civil Rights movement as a whole, but the Emmett Till case is a prime example of his thesis. It was an event that took place suddenly and without warning, but carried significant implications that played into the national context of Civil Rights struggle. The study of the grass-roots events that inspired the national Civil Rights scene has been often neglected in favor of a top-down study focused on leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>46</sup>

From the moment that the images of Till's bloated body were published in JET magazine, the black community was keenly aware of the level of atrocity that had taken place. Till's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted on having an open casket trial, "so that all the world can see what they did to my boy."<sup>47</sup> The power of image was known from the very beginning in this case. Harvey Young argues that it was "Bradley's concerted efforts not only to display her son's bloated and misshapen corpse but also her maternal grief for the world to see" that ultimately solidified its exceptional place in the Civil Rights struggle.<sup>48</sup> An article from the September 10, 1955 issue of *New York Amsterdam News* estimated that 50,000 viewed the body of Emmett Till in all of its grotesque deformity that resulted from the beating and the time spent under the water. Furthermore, as Michael Randolph Oby stated in his master's thesis, this allowed black

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<sup>44</sup> Harvey Young. "A New Fear Known to Me: Emmett Till's Influence and the Black Panther Party."

*Southern Historical Quarterly* (45, no. 4: 22-47), 43.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis M. Killian. "Organization, Rationality and Spontaneity in the Civil Rights Movement" *American Sociological Review*, Vol 49, No. 6 (Dec., 1984). pp 770-783.

<sup>46</sup> Patterns of American History page 307ff

<sup>47</sup> *JET magazine* September 22, 1955

<sup>48</sup> Young, 27.



journalists a chance to photograph the body and distribute these pictures to more people than Till-Bradley could have ever imagined.<sup>49</sup>

Amy Louise Wood focused her work on the role of photography and depictions of lynching as propagation of the mob's actions as "socially acceptable and responsible action." The depictions of lynching were used to reinforce the message of the mob's actions to a broader audience. The lynch mob usually posed with the victim, and posed in such a way as to firmly suggest a juxtaposition of the solidarity of white society and the image of the black victim "as captive and defiled, visual embodiments of their ideal position in the white supremacist imagination."<sup>50</sup> In Southern culture, these images were meant to show the weakness of blacks and the strength and solidarity of the white community. The Till case differed in that the images were used by the black community to communicate the callousness of the white community juxtaposed with the innocence and helplessness of Emmett Till. Ironically, the black community was essentially saying the same thing that had always been said of images of lynching, but because the black community was saying it, it ultimately had a different meaning. It had a stronger meaning that they wanted these pictures of their own shown, and were able to point at these pictures and show that something was wrong.<sup>51</sup>

The distribution of the pictures of Emmett Till was a way for "viewers to experience...the brutal 'justice' of the lynching."<sup>52</sup> But instead of these pictures bearing a meaning that reinforced the solidarity of the white community as they had in the past, they reinforced the solidarity of the black community. On an unprecedented level, the black community outside of the South was able to see what was happening to blacks within the South.

Furthermore, Clenora Hudson-Weems argued that the murder of Emmett Till "was the epitome of the ugliness and hatred of racism. It made people uncomfortable, but it made people act. If you want to move a people, kill their children...I believe that Emmett Till was the straw that

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Randolph Oby. "Black Press Coverage of the Emmett Till Lynching as a Catalyst to the Civil Rights Movement" (master's thesis: Georgia State University, 2007), 15.

<sup>50</sup> Amy Louise Wood. "Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy" *American Nineteenth Century History* 6, no. 3: 373-399. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed August 29, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> In his seminal 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited*, Bob Dylan also made reference to the power of images associated with lynching. The closing track of the album was a 11 minute ballad entitled *Desolation Row*, of which the opening line is "They're selling postcards of the hanging..." Further illustrated the permeation of lynching images in American art, which is an extension of American consciousness.

<sup>52</sup> Wood, 379.

broke the camel's back, that his death sparked the flame."<sup>53</sup> Till's age, innocence, and his unfamiliarity and newness to the South combined to make him what Hudson-Weems calls a "Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement."<sup>54</sup>

In a booklet entitled "Time Bomb," published February 1956 in Mississippi, Olive Arnold Adams argued that the "catalytic agent was supplied by the May 17, 1954 decision of the Supreme Court of the United States of America, which rightfully declared that racial segregation in public schools [is] unconstitutional."<sup>55</sup> This event was undoubtedly influential on much of the Civil Rights movement, paving the way for more powerful legislation to be passed that helped to establish racial equality before the law. However, the Emmett Till case affected people on a more personal level. The murder of a fourteen-year-old boy naturally turns up richer emotional soil in the hearts of black men than a decision issued by nine white men in Washington, D.C.

Fredrick Harris argued that although the Till case "has been overshadowed by...accounts of the importance of the Brown decision and the Montgomery bus boycott, it had real political meaning for many African-Americans who transformed their collective anger into collective action as Till's murder became a symbol of defiance against white supremacy."<sup>56</sup> First of all, the black community was able to use the Emmett Till case so effectively due to its proximity to the Brown v. Board of Education decision. With the doctrine of "Separate but Equal" overturned, the white community was forced to come to grips with the new status of black people. The murder of Emmett Till and the acquittal of his killers showed that there were still social taboos in place that could not simply be overcome by a judge's ruling. Second, Till's age showed the callousness of Southern racism, that two men could feel justified in killing a fourteen-year-old boy. Thirdly, the position of Emmett Till as an outsider to the

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<sup>53</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems. "Resurrecting Emmett Till: The Catalyst of the Modern Civil Rights Movement" *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Nov., 1998), pp 179-188.

<sup>54</sup> Hudson-Weems is a professor of English at the University of Missouri. In 1994, she published a book entitled *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*."

<sup>55</sup> Olive Arnold Adams. *Time Bomb: Mississippi Exposed and the Full Story of Emmett Till*. February 1956.

<sup>56</sup> Fredrick C. Harris "It Takes a Tragedy to Arouse Them: Collective Memory and Collective Action during the Civil Rights Movement" *Social Movement Studies* 5, no. 1: 19-43. SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed August 29, 2013).

## *This Boy's Dreadful Tragedy*

South and how effortlessly ignorant his breaking of these social taboos was, showed how out of line these customs were with the rest of the nation.

Clenora Hudson-Weems also wrote that it was not "Rosa Parks' refusal to surrender her bus seat...that sparked the riots, boycotts and social upheaval of the 1960s. Hudson has a different picture vividly in mind about the beginning of the civil rights movement. That picture is of Emmett Till in his coffin, battered and bloated."<sup>57</sup> Undoubtedly, the image of a murdered child was much more powerful than a woman who refused to give up her bus seat.

Till was by no means the first person to be murdered in the South, nor was he the first person whose body was seen by large numbers of people either inside or outside of the black community. There was power in the fact that Emmett Till was only fourteen years old and that he was not from the South. However, the real power was what took place after he died, his mother demanded that his body be brought back to Chicago. Once he was in Chicago, there was a funeral held where thousands of people viewed his bloated and disfigured body. In addition to the people who saw the body on display there in Chicago, *Jet* magazine published pictures of his body nationally, and many of the black community all over the nation saw his body. The image was published on a full page of the the September 15, 1955 of *Jet* Magazine, and it was juxtaposed with pictures of Emmett Till's early life. These images were seen by millions. Harvey Young argued that Emmett Till's death "triggered the imaginations of blacknyouth - prompting them not to think of future utopias but present-day threats...former NAACP President Julian Bond...noted that the Chicago teenager's murder 'created a great vulnerability and fear of all things southern in my teenaged mind.'"<sup>58</sup>

After the acquittal, there were protests held in Emmett Till's name as far away as New York. Mamie Till-Bradley was the featured speaker at one such meeting, which was advertised by the headline, "Hear the Mississippi Story!! From the Lips and the Heart of Emmett Till's Mother and Mrs. Ruby Hurley, NAACP Southern Director who come direct from the Trial."<sup>59</sup> There was also a meeting in Chicago, documented by *Jet* magazine where Willie Reed spoke and, "urged northern Negroes to quit shouting and

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<sup>57</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems. "Resurrecting Emmett Till: The Catalyst of the Modern Civil Rights Movement" *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Nov., 1998), 183.

<sup>58</sup> Young, 26.

<sup>59</sup> "Here the Mississippi Story," *New York Amsterdam News*, Oct 1, 1955, 9.

begin working to help their people in the South.”<sup>60</sup> Michael Randolph Oby argued that,

In the months that followed Till’s brutal lynching and before the Rosa Parks incident, the black papers printed numerous articles which not only expressed the outrage of the black community but also preserved the history of the incident. The stream of articles insisted on the action and tied the boy’s death to the need for greater liberty for blacks in America.<sup>61</sup>

Not only was the Till murder, trial, and acquittal covered extensively in black newspapers, it was accompanied by a call to action. In a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Defender*, Fred Poindexter wrote that, “In a state like Mississippi...we must add one other trait to our character and that is courage and a willingness to fight and even die for these rights.” Not only did the Emmett Till case bring about a heightened awareness for the black community, it inspired people like Fred Poindexter to encourage others to “Fight for Rights.”<sup>62</sup>

The New York Times reported a protest in Harlem in which, “Ten thousand persons at a Harlem Rally were urged yesterday to go to the ballot boxes, to exhort their political precinct captains, and if need be, to march on Washington to bring an end to racism and lynching in the United States.”<sup>63</sup> Once again, these people were dissatisfied with the verdict of the Till case, and they were encouraged to action. There was also an NAACP rally in Chicago reported by the *New York Times* in which, “The reign of terror now going on in Mississippi: the lynch-murder of 14 year-old, Chicago-born Emmett Louis Till in Mississippi and the subsequent acquittal of those charged with his death” were protested by many.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Jet Magazine*, Oct. 6, 1955, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Randolph, 28.

<sup>62</sup> Poindexter, Fred. “Fight for Rights” *Chicago Defender*, November 19, 1955: ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Chicago Defender* (national edition).

<sup>63</sup> “10,000 In Harlem Protest Verdict,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1955, 10.

<sup>64</sup> “Till Trial Protested,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1955, p. 7.

### **Artistic Response to Emmett Till**

Emmett Till's story resonated deep in the American consciousness, and was expressed in various artistic forms in the months and years the followed. Langston Hughes wrote a poem entitled "The Money, Mississippi Blues" in October, and Aaron Kramer wrote "Blues for Emmett Till" in November of 1955.<sup>65</sup> Phillip Kolin wrote that these pieces "challenged listeners to think about racial injustice in Eisenhower's America."<sup>66</sup> One of the more famous examples of this was Bob Dylan's song "The Death of Emmett Till," recorded during his 1962 sessions when he was recording the album "Freewheelin' Bob Dylan." Dylan performed this song extensively both in his concerts and in special events such as an appearance on "Billy Faier Radio Show in New York in October 1962."<sup>67</sup> The nearly five-minute, seven-stanza ballad was a pseudo-historical account at best, but historicity was not Dylan's goal. Stephen J. Whitfield asserts that "the chief moral that Dylan seemed to derive from the lynching was its inherent injustice, which a heightened ethical sensitivity might remedy."<sup>68</sup> Dylan exhorts his listeners to "speak out against this...crime so unjust" and challenges them that, "if all of us folks that thinks alike/if we gave all we could give/We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live."<sup>69</sup> Like many of the African-American newspapers that had reported the events in 1955, Dylan's lamentation, seven years after the injustice, was still accompanied by a call to action.

Although he never intended to be, Emmett Till was a tragic hero. The horror of his murder was displayed for the entire nation to see. People, specifically African-Americans, were able to see the dehumanizing effects of racism in Mississippi, where a fourteen-year-old boy could be tortured and murdered and denied justice. The extensive coverage of the case in African-American newspapers helped to plant the image of Emmett Till

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<sup>65</sup> Both of these pieces were also set to music. Jobe Huntley composed the music for "The Money, Mississippi Blues" and Clyde R. Appleton composed the music for "Blues for Emmett Till" Kolin, 118.

<sup>66</sup> Kolin, Philip C. "Haunting America: Emmett Till in Music and Song." *Southern Cultures* 15, no. 3: 115-138. Humanities International Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed August 29, 2013), 119.

<sup>67</sup> Kolin, 119.

<sup>68</sup> Whitfield, 99.

<sup>69</sup> Bob Dylan "The Death of Emmett Till" Copyright © 1963, 1968 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1991, 1996 by Special Rider Music.

deep in the American consciousness. This concrete conscious manifestation of racism inspired subsequent generations to act and set into motion the Civil Rights Movement. In the months and years that followed the death of Emmett Till, Rosa Parks helped to instigate the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and Little Rock Central High School was integrated. There were also lunch counter sit-ins, Freedom Rides, integration of Mississippi universities, a March on Washington, and finally, ten years after Emmett Till was murdered, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Emmett Till was indeed 'the straw that broke the camel's back,' and that camel was never again able to stand again.